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Robin Michel Caudell

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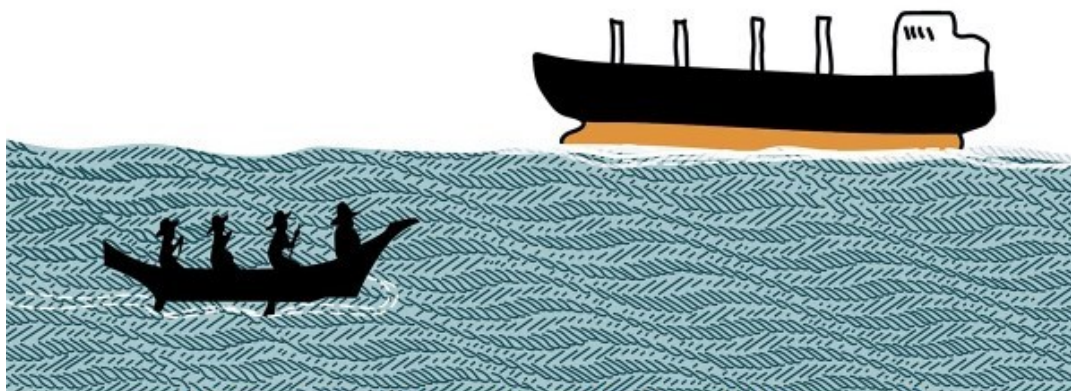


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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Common Sense & Pin Money: The Material Culture and Legacy of Lula Annie Butler 1909-2009

Robin Michel Caudell

The First Nations here and the Mid-Atlantic Algonquins I hail from, are coastal peoples shaped by geography, internal and external conflicts over land and natural resources, and the cresting of the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean, respectively.

We are on opposite coasts of North America, but we share histories of colonization, resistance, survival and resilience.

My Choptank and Nanticoke ancestors were at ground zero of English contact in the New World. Explorer Captain John Smith led his first voyage up the Chesapeake, from the Algonquian Chesepiooc meaning, “at a big river” or “great shellfish bay” with a crew of 14 from June 2 to July 21, 1608 between the Western and Eastern shores of Maryland.

The Eastern Shore is a spit of land, the Delmarva Peninsula, which rises, barely, between the Chesapeake, the largest U.S. estuary, and the Atlantic Ocean.

In his log, Capt. Smith wrote on June 3:

“Encounter with Accowmack Indians meeting with a ‘king’ who is the “comeliest proper civil savage we countered.”¹

At Choptank, located in greater Preston, my hometown, there is a state sign pronouncing the Choptank Indians are extinct.

“Do you feel extinct?” I said once to my cousin, Glenn, as we stood a spear’s throw from the banks of the Choptank River.

“No,” he said.

We smiled.

We know who we are because our maternal Grandmother Lula Annie Thomas Butler told us.

Well, she told us who she was.

“I’m Injun, and I can’t help it,” she proclaimed in her 95th year.

“I am.”

My daughter, Nicole Lys Caudell, was filming her great-great grandmother for her senior project, “Braided Roots: An Autobiographical Documentary about Racial Consciousness in Black, White and Red America,” which won first prize in its category at Temple University’s Diamond Film Festival.

My grandmother was born May 17, 1909, the third-born child and eldest daughter of Walter Thomas (1877) and Harriet Emily Dyer Thomas (1880).

Grand Mom came into the light in the second crook of Newton Road in the house, which

¹ National Park Service, *Captain John Smith-First Voyage*. <http://www.nps.gov/cajo/learn/historyculture/first-voyage.htm>, accessed January 11, 2018.

descendants of James Harris, the Nicholite “New Quakers” leader (after the death of its founder Joseph Nichols, December 1807) built for her parents, who worked on their farm.²

My grandmother learned the domestic arts from her mother, Harriet, who learned from her mother, Martha Adams, who was married to Phillip Dyer, the Indian and 19th century mariner, dowser and farmer.

My grandmother like her mother and her grandmother before her was a quilter.

“Robbie, come help me,” Grand Mom called from her bedroom.

She was inserting Martha’s 19th century threadbare log-cabin quilt oozing cotton stuffing between the layers of her double-sided quilt for padding.

She wanted me to hold sections down as she tied it off.

Grand Mom, you can’t do that!” I said.

“Yes, I can,” she said.

“Watch me.”

Every night, Grand Mom knelt at the side of her slatted, wooden bed to pray in the Prchal House on the way to Choptank.

“Now I lay me down to sleep

I pray the Lord my soul to keep

If I should die before I wake

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Amen.”

That was only a warm-up before her long, whispered interlude with the Creator. Her lips moved unerringly beseeching the Creator to intervene on the behalf of herself, family, church, community and country.

Grand Mom’s strong, copper fingers were linked. Her hands were folded and rested on a layer of plaid S&H Green Stamps blankets topped with quilts she made from fabric remnants and sample books given to her by Mrs. Sarah Covey, proprietor of Mid-Shore Fabrics in Federalsburg, Maryland.

Miss Sarah had a showroom at her residence and purchased fabric from the Sewing Outlet in Federalsburg. Her clients’ drapery-and-slipcover visions were made reality at Mid-Shore Fabrics and Workroom located at the town residence of her daughter, Mrs. Doris Harding, whose business partner was Mrs. Inez Glime.

There, they transformed fabric patterned with motifs such as “1776-1976,” “Wye Oak,” and “Flying Cloud” to grace a myriad of windows, comfortable chairs and sofas in the “Land of Pleasant Living.”

The Prchal House was a white, two-story frame house without central heat and indoor plumbing.

On the enclosed porch, there was red hand-pump that Grand Mom’s strong hands pumped off basins, pots and milk cans full of water for drinking, bathing, cooking and washing the dishes.

² Kenneth Lane Carroll, *Joseph Nichols and the Nicholites: A Look at the “New Quakers” of Maryland, Delaware, North and South Carolina*, (United States: Easton Publishing Company, 1962), 62.

Grand Mom's hands earned her a living as a domestic worker, cook and cleaner, for 80-plus years in Preston and beyond. Her nimble fingers picked cherries and pears from the Prchal trees and winter crease in the surrounding fields in the fall. She made preserves to spread on homemade rolls to warm our bellies while the Home Comfort wood stove popped in the dark of winter.

Her deft hands were tireless. She segued from beheading chickens with an ax to delicate embroidery of doilies to the hours upon hours she found to hand sew and machine stitch the quilts, which we piled under during darkest and coldest of winter nights.

Grand Mom's "make do" ethos made a way out of no way decades before re-cycle, re-purpose and green were hashtags.

A lifelong Caroline County resident, her Preston household was outfitted with passed-down linens from family and employers as well as quilts, tablecloths, aprons, and pillows she created from fabric-sample books and fabric remnants obtained from Mrs. Covey, her longest employer who was a Williams born down Choptank the same year as Grand Mom's birth.

My grandmother's artistic impulse -- vibrant, improvisational and individually expressive in her way -- is a thread of a rural, Atlantic World quilting continuum spanning from East Preston, Nova Scotia to Gee's Bend, Alabama; which some scholars say are transferences of African weaving traditions.

In her seminal book, "Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts," Carolyn Mazloomi writes in her introduction:

"In the late 1970s, scholars attempting to codify the art form identified certain aesthetic characteristics based on a small group of quilts that were distinct from traditional European patchwork quilts. Those experts defined African-American quilts by such traits as vertical stripes, bright colors, asymmetry, improvisation, symbolic forms, multiple patterns, large stitches, and large design elements. Parallels to West African textiles were cited and it was asserted that these were evidence of an unconscious cultural memory of Africa. While many scholars embraced this criteria for defining African American quilts, others found it narrowly stereotypical. (Women of Color Quilter's Network) members scoffed at the phenomenon of outsiders creating the definition for something alien to their own cultural references."³

My grandmother's quilts contain many of the previously mentioned quilt elements, but my Grand Mom, would have scoffed at being labeled Black, let alone, attributing what she did to Africa.

"Blaaacck," she said.

"Blaaacck. What is that?"

My grandmother was a descendant of the Copper Colored People of the Americas, and her aesthetics, her epigenetic memories originate right here on Turtle Island with its rich traditions of basketry, quill work, beading, story belts, leather work and Hogan building.

She knew her maternal grandfather, Phillip, the Indian, who left us evidence of his resistance to

³ Carolyn Mazloomi. *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts*. (New York, NY: Clarkson Potter Publishing, 1998), 14.

paper genocide in the historical record.

In colonial Maryland, Christianized Indians were designated as mulatto, which segued over time to free people of color to colored people to Negro to African American.⁴

In one of the last censuses I found him, Grand Pop Phillip's surname is listed not as the usual English "Dyer" but "Depe," and in parenthesis "Hope."

It was a reclamation of his suppressed ancestry, my birthright and what I must transmit as the seventh granddaughter to future generations.

I learned how to build a loom and make hatbands, belt, wampum or story belts from Ray "Tehanetorans" Fadden, a respected Mohawk Elder, educator and founder with his wife, Christine, of the Six Nations Indian Museum at Onchiota.

I have lived 31 years in Haudenosaunee territory, among the Mohawks, Keepers of the Eastern Door of the Iroquois Confederacy.

When I first went to Akwesasne, the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, which straddles the U.S.-Canadian border, my grandmother assured me all would be well, and I wouldn't have to explain anything about my origins.

I sat in the bakery of Cecilia Mitchell, once a principal medicine woman for the Iroquois, as she greeted Clan Mothers as they entered.

We sipped tea, and they spoke in Mohawk.

"You look like our people down South," one of the Clan Mothers said to me.

I nodded and smiled.

"Bone knows bone," my friend, poet/artist Suzanne Rancourt, of Abenaki and Huron descent.

Like Harriet Ross Tubman, Grand Mom sold ginger breads and quilts for income, pin money she called it, using skills she learned from her mother, Harriet Dyer Thomas, who learned from her mother, Martha Adams Dyer, the earliest matriarch and quilter, thus far, identified in this lineage of Eastern Shore women.

Grand Mom made dozens if not hundreds of quilts to provide warmth and visual pleasure for her family, friends and fellow congregants at Mt. Calvary Methodist Church in Preston.

Nova Scotia, the Eastern Shore and Gee's Bend's isolative geographies midwived unbounded creativity made visible through the brilliance and ingenuity of Africa's and Amerikuu's daughters and their steadfast hands.

Preston and Gee's Bend have approximately the same population, but unlike the Alabama quilters' collective and the African Nova Scotia Quilter's Association, Grand Mom created her Chesapeake vernacular alone.

Her alto voice, singing the old hymns, was the only one heard in her westward-facing bedroom on Newton Road as she sewed strips of cloth, popping with patterns, together at her teal-metal Singer sewing machine.

This seer's stitchery was a fabric-jazz scat embedded with a post-modern timeline of textile arts in the United States.

Whenever I wrap up in any of her double-sided quilts, I dwell within my Grandmother's

⁴ Ned Heite, *The Winnesocum Disaster*, 2009, <http://www.nativeamericansofdelaware.com>, accessed January 11, 2018.

brilliance and love.

My genetic material twines from my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, a fertile admixture originating in Caroline and Talbot counties.

But this grandmother schooled me in the needle arts. As a child, she taught me how to sew, embroidery, quilt, crochet, loom potholders and braid rugs.

Grand Mom took in laundry and dressed wild geese on the side. So, I learned from an early age how to wet clothes to iron crisp whites with heavy flat irons she heated on the Home Comfort wood stove.

My small fingers, she said, were perfect for picking the pin feathers out of waterfowl and for cleaning Mason jars she used for canning.

I would not be who I am today without Grand Mom.

Whenever I face a challenge, I hear her sage words:

If there's a will, there's a way."

That is the campaign tagline of my daughter, Nicole Lys Caudell, who is running for Register of Wills in Worcester County on the Shore.

She is a filmmaker, visual artist, photographer and bureaucrat.

In her artist statement for our 2015 Common Sense & Pin Money exhibition, Nikki identifies herself as a "Fragmatist" meaning one who deconstructs to make something new."

Her great-grandmother Lula was ever the pragmatist taking fragments of fabric to construct something new.

About her, Nikki wrote:

"As a child, I would sit and watch my Great-Grandmother piece together scraps of cloth others had trashed and make treasures that would keep us warm in subzero temperatures in upstate New York.

"When I closed my eyes and pulled my Great-Grandmother's quilt up to my chin, I could smell her famous gingerbread and hear her soulful laugh...the type of laugh that made the deepest pain melt away. Somehow, I knew she would protect me even though she was hundreds of miles away.

"My Great-Grandmother's hands are the color of the clay found at the base of the Choptank where our people came from...her, eyes the color of the Atlantic on the cusp of a storm.

'I am Injun,' she says.

"What I know, all that I am, I owe to her and to her mother's mother and so on. They showed all of us that we could make anything out of nothing, a way out of no way, and that attitude was always more important than fact."⁵

Grand Mom stuffed old rags between the ribs of wooden slats peeping beneath the horse-hair plaster in the Prchal House to ward off the damp and cold that was thwarted by her quilts.

In an inspirational essay on the necessity of beauty in the lives of black women, "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," feminist writer bell hooks describe the significance of quilt making of her grandmother, Baba, for whom it was a spiritual process where one learned to surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go...it was an art of stillness and

⁵ Nicole Lys Caudell. "Common Sense & Pin Money: The Material Culture and Artistic Legacy of Lula Annie Butler 1909-2009," Exhibition Artist Statement at the Fiber Arts Center of the Eastern Shore, Denton, MD. 2015.

concentration, a work which renewed the spirit...a way to calm the heart and ease the mind.”⁶

My grandmother like Baba did her thing as many of her peers, antecedents and the women of European ethnicities, primarily English, Irish and German, in Preston.

In “Voices from the Land: A Caroline County Memoir” by Mary Ann Fleetwood, quilting was one of the traditional pastimes of county women. The normal quilting stitch is the running stitch or eight to ten up-and-down stitches per inch in Caroline County. The briar stitch, also called the cat claw is used with the crazy quilt.⁷

It was also a type of folk art practiced frequently on a communal basis between 1890 and 1900 in homes. Mrs. Roberta Fletcher, near Garland Lake, remembers that when women finished a quilt, it was customary to celebrate by a ritual called “quilt shaking.” A cat was placed in the center of the new quilt, and the creature was bounced up and down on the coverlet. Wherever it scurried off—the woman it passed was to be the next bride.⁸

Another tradition of the quilters involved marriage. If there were unmarried women in the household, these potential brides were the first to sleep under the new quilt. The young men they dreamed of would be the men they married.⁹

I do not know if my grandmother received a quilt from her mother when she married Roman (Lockerman) Butler, because if she did, it didn’t survive, like many quilts of women of color on the Shore at large.

In “Spirits of the Cloth,” Mazloomi writes: “There are exquisite examples of antique quilts in museums across the nation whose origins have been attributed to Southern women of European extraction, but if those quilts had voices, they might well speak of dark hands that manipulated the pieces of fabric with nearly invisible stitches.”¹⁰

In my limited research thus far, I’ve only found two quilters of color in the historical record. Both, coincidentally, lived in Snow Hill, Worcester County.

Josephine Elizabeth Waters’ circa 1930 quilt is comprised of more than 8,000 hand-pieced cotton strips.

“The slight irregularities and the many fortuitous color alignments create a dazzling, active surface that leaves the eye no place to rest,” writes Robert Shaw in “Quilts: A Living Tradition.”¹¹

Ruby Purnell Waters of Black and Native ancestry, possibly Pocomoke or Accohannock, attended Princess Anne Academy and Bowie State Teacher’s College and started her teaching career at a segregated school.

In 1995, her two-known quilts, were exhibited in the Fulton Hall Gallery at Salisbury State University.

“Women’s Quilts, Women’s Voices” explored the quilt making tradition on the Lower Eastern

⁶ Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth*, 65.

⁷ Mary Ann Fleetwood, *Voices From the Land: A Caroline County Memoir*. (United States: Queen Anne Press, 1983), 88.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth*, 13.

¹¹ Robert Shaw, *Quilts: A Living Tradition*. (La Jolla, CA: Hugh Lauter Levin Assoc., 1995), 194.

Shore.

In the exhibition catalogue, Waters states:

“I was in Ocean City with my mother on the Boardwalk, I saw a quilt display in the window of a store. I went home, bought fabric in Snow Hill at William Goodman and Son and made that quilt [top] from memory.”

She pieced together her first quilt for her hope chest in 1934.¹²

Mrs. Waters was born two years after my grandmother on September 3, 1911, and they both died in 2009, she June 9, and my grandmother on September 28.

Mrs. Waters is buried in the Ebenezer United Methodist Church Cemetery in Snow Hill.

My Grandmother is interred in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, my ancestral cemetery founded in 1849.

Lisa Waters is as proud of her grandmother's quilts as I am of mine.

They are love made visible by fabric griots who remind us from whence we came and instruct us in how to go on.

Wa-dogh.

¹² *Women's Quilts, Women's Voices*, Exhibition Catalog. (Salisbury, MD: 1995), 3.

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